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Hann, Chris

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Gellner's Structural-Functional-Culturalism*

CHRIS HANN**

Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, Halle (Saale), Germany

Abstract: Enlightenment traditions celebrating the individual and knowledge that is universally valid are only one stream in the social philosophy of Ernest Gellner. As a philosopher, he vehemently rejected Wittgensteinian relativism. As a social anthropologist, he prioritised the study of 'structure' and 'function', rather than cultural 'costume'. Yet his theory of nationalism relies on a concept of culture, which I suggest derives ultimately from the Herderian countercurrent to enlightenment universalism. This notion of culture has a surprising affinity with the world view of Clifford Geertz. The paper argues that such holistic notions of 'a culture' are unconvincing anthropologically, increasingly unrealistic sociologically, and anti-liberal politically.

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Introduction

Five years after his death, the influence of Ernest Gellner remains pervasive. It tends perhaps to be stronger among sociologists and political scientists than among philosophers and social anthropologists, though these were the nominal disciplines in which he worked for most of his career. He is probably best known for his work on nationalism, but his contributions to understanding Islamic societies and socialist societies continue to fascinate later scholars. In all of his work Gellner is viewed by posterity, as he was in his lifetime, as a voice of cool reason; and he himself encouraged such a view, e.g. in characterising his intellectual position as that of the 'enlightenment puritan', or the 'rationalist fundamentalist'. When the rest of the world was drifting into relativism and postmodernism, he stood firm for universalism. Knowledge, notably that produced in the modern West, could transcend the boundaries of culture and morality. It was fatuous for relativists to pretend otherwise. Hence the many extended polemics, with Geertz in anthropology and with the successors of Wittgenstein in philosophy.

In assessing the dichotomies that Gellner constructs to support his 'cognitive universalism', it is easy to overlook the fact that he, too, relies extensively on a concept of culture. The aim of this paper is to subject this to a closer inspection. I shall point to a surprising degree of overlap with the dominant Geertzian usage and suggest that, despite the ceaseless rejection of Wittgenstein, underpinning Gellner's work is a concept of culture that derives ultimately not from the philosophers of the Enlightenment but from his own background in Central Europe.

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**) Direct all correspondence to: Chris Hann, Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, P.O. Box 11 03 51, D-06017 Halle (Saale), Germany, e-mail hann@eth.mpg.de

Structure and culture

Gellner's interest in culture diverges markedly from that of most contemporary anthropologists. When he discovered social anthropology at the London School of Economics in the 1950s, the tradition of Bronislaw Malinowski's 'functionalism' had been modified by Radcliffe-Brown's insistence on the search for general principles of social structure. Gellner found this synthesis deeply congenial and remained loyal to this 'structural-functionalism' long after most of his contemporaries had moved on elsewhere. Most of them, in Britain as in America, went in what can loosely be termed the Geertzian direction. They paid less attention to function and structure than to the meanings understood by the actors they studied and the problems of interpreting what was said and what was symbolised in 'other cultures'. Gellner always resisted this move. His stance retained an affinity with that of the early Edmund Leach, whose analysis of political systems in Highland Burma [Leach 1954] was a search for structure rather than an effort to understand the cultural 'dress' of the social order. Much the same could be said of Gellner's adaptation of segmentary lineage models in the analysis of political systems in Highland Morocco [Gellner 1969]. But whereas the later Leach used the methods of French structuralism to explore the cultural phenomena he had previously disdained, Gellner was never attracted by these methods and polemicised vigorously against the rise of cultural studies: he was not interested in analysing the details of cuisine or 'wallpaper'! Culture was at best of secondary importance. Of course every human group had such a 'costume', but social anthropologists were concerned with 'the real structural and functional aspects of our life' [Gellner 1992a: 95], not with inventories of folklore and similar 'decoration'.

From this angle, Gellner is a structural-functionalist of the old British school and very far from being either a structuralist or a culturalist. But his interest in long term transformations, notably the rise of the West and the significance of nationalism, led him to develop a structured model of human history that depended crucially on a concept of culture. He elaborated this in successive versions of his theory of nationalism, which he famously defined as a principle that requires the political unit (the state) that should coincide with the national unit: "Nationalism is primarily a political principle, which holds that the political and the national unit should be congruent." [Gellner 1983: 1] As he concedes a few pages later, this definition is parasitic on a definition of nation, which turns out to be even harder to pin down than state. Both are contingent: "Having a nation is not an inherent attribute of humanity, but it has now come to appear as such (...) Two men are of the same nation if and only if they share the same culture, where culture in turn means a system of ideas and signs and associations and ways of behaving and communicating." [ibid.: 6-7] Gellner then adds a subjective, voluntarist criterion and suggests that, because it is so hard to define culture, we should look instead at what it does. In the agrarian age: "Local culture is almost invisible (...) cultures proliferate in this world, but its conditions do not *generally* encourage what might be called cultural imperialism." [ibid.: 12] Complex proliferations are possible but the key point is the absence of homogeneity. In industrial society, in contrast, "A high culture pervades the whole of society, defines it and needs to be sustained by the polity. *That* is the secret of nationalism." [ibid.: 18] Gellner in fact argues for a triple correspondence (or 'congruence') of culture, nation and state, which is achieved in unique modern conditions because of the organisational re-

quirements of an industrial society.¹ In this and other books on the subject, he further insists [e.g. Gellner 1997: 3] that humans have always lived in cultures, long before modern ethnic groups and nations were invented, just as they have always had social organisation. His examples include the diversity of the Ottoman Empire, based on recognition of several religiously-defined *millet*. The implication is that one's group is one's culture, though he also mentions the possibility of 'multiculturalism even in small bands' [ibid.: 14], as documented by Lévi-Strauss in Brazil.

Here I am not interested in pursuing the 'modernist' theory of nationalism, arguably the crowning jewel of Gellner's *oeuvre*, but the concept of culture, which is left largely unelaborated and implicit. Gellner, like Malinowski, slides between a singular usage of culture (useful in highlighting how humans differ from other species) and the plural use in which cultures appear as thing-like, bounded wholes. As he put it: "...this capacity of ours for acquiring culture does not prejudice just which culture it is to be. Cultures vary enormously from one community to another, and they can also change with great rapidity within a single community." [ibid.: 2] In Chapter 15 of the same book, based on one of his last public debates before his death in November 1995, Gellner looks again at the issue of cultural continuity and suggests, in line with his modernist position, that most modern nations 'have navels invented for them by their own nationalist propaganda'. [ibid.: 96]² He finally declares both temporal and spatial (dis)continuities between cultures to be open questions that warrant further research. But at whatever instant of time the investigator comes along, he implies that individuals can be slotted in to one, and only one, culture. There is no mention of variation within these 'package-deal worlds' [Gellner 1992a: 80]: everything of importance in each culture seems to be shared by all its members.

To summarise the argument so far, Gellner is at heart loyal to British structural-functionalism and pushes the search for elegant structural models to an extreme with his multiple homologies between group, culture, nation and state. His dependence on a notion of culture leads me to call him a 'structural culturalist'. Critics have pointed out that even highly homogeneous 'nation-states', such as modern Poland and Turkey, still contain a variety of cultural minorities. True, but Gellner can defend his theory, in those cases, by pointing to the sharp contrast between the block-like 'high culture' of those states today and the multiple 'low cultures' which prevailed in the past. I am more concerned to question the supposition that bounded 'low' (or 'wild') cultures determined the opinions and behaviour of their members in the age preceding nationalism. The notion of cultural 'membership' seems central to Gellner's theory, before nationalism as well as after it, when it is rendered explicit [Gellner 1995].

Now, is this the legitimate abstraction of a model-builder or an untenable reification of the concept of culture? In Gellner's hypothetical Ruritania [Gellner 1983], cultures are on the scene long before the intellectuals set to work on them for the purposes of nation-building. But what were these cultures? In the central Carpathian zone where I have done some fieldwork, the largest culture was presumably the 'Ruthenian', with Poles,

¹) The theory has attracted criticism for its implicit functionalism. For a defence of Gellner on this point see [Mouzelis 1998].

²) Gellner [1997: 96] offers the Czechs as a typical example, in contrast to the case of Poland, which has a more genuine navel, and Estonia, which is 'altogether navel-less'. This dichotomy corresponds to the *Kulturnation* versus *Kleinvolk* distinction.

Jews and others forming significant minorities. With Poles there was intermarriage and much sharing of cultural traits, with Jews there was not. Within this Ruthenian population there was considerable variation and complexity. The 'members' had little sense of belonging to one group or culture; depending on the context they might state that their primary affiliation was to a small cluster of villages, to a larger region ('Lemkovyna'), to an emerging nation ('Ukraine'), to the vast east Slavic 'linguistic community', or to the entire world of Byzantine Christianity. In short, the terms 'group' and 'culture' become fuzzy, even arbitrary, as soon as one comes to apply them.

The Herderian tradition

How might this notion of culture be explained in terms of Gellner's general intellectual stance? His own sketches of his philosophical roots are consistent over the years, with Hume and Kant regularly singled out for quotation. Yet he recognises the inadequacy of Humean psychology and, by implication, of the British empirical tradition more generally, which was flawed by its 'atomistic individualism' [Gellner 1992b]. For the necessary collective corrective to Cartesian rationalism he turns to Durkheim, who showed how socially indispensable compulsions are induced through ritual. I want to suggest that he might equally have found this corrective closer to his own personal roots in Central Europe, in the tradition of theorising that dates back to Herder. Herder's notion of the organic community, passing on its accumulated traditions through time, is supplemented by a notion of the authentic individual, partly derived from his teacher Immanuel Kant, for whose philosophy the categorising capacities of the human mind were crucial.³ In a way, Herder's world of 'cultures' is not so much an alternative to the Enlightenment *imaginaire* of equal rights-bearing citizens as a magnification of this individualism at the level of the collectivity. His philosophy, like that of Gellner, is compatible with the rationalism of Descartes, as it is with cognitive and interpretive approaches that approach culture as a given package; but it is remote from contemporary theories of culture as a generative process.

I have no space here to outline the complex trajectory of the Herderian concept of culture before it became the foundational concept of twentieth century American anthropology.⁴ It is conventional to view Franz Boas, educated in Germany, as the pivotal figure. Steven Reyna [2002] argues that Boas was the first to realise and document how culture provides the 'software' which determines not merely all the rich contents which fill Kant's empty categories, but the culturally variable definition of those categories in the first place. We know that Boas read Kant and, even if no direct link to Herder has been established, this concept of a cultural community was transmitted by a sort of intellectual osmosis. It was finally elaborated and celebrated by Boas and his students in the specific political conditions of the inter-war period.

Bronislaw Malinowski did his best to make the concept of culture similarly central in the British tradition, but here its triumph was delayed by the structural-functionalism of the late colonial period. Gellner, who acknowledged Malinowski as his 'intellectual aca-

³) When Herder argued that each person had his or her own 'measure', he was in effect repeating on the micro level his argument about collectivities. "Jeder Mensch hat ein eigenes Maass, gleichsam eine eigene Stimmung aller seiner sinnlichen Gefühle zu einander." [cited by Taylor 1992: 30].

⁴) See Kuper [1999] for more detail on recent developments in North America.

demic grandfather' [Gellner 1995: 86], himself contributed significantly to the illumination of Malinowski's Polish-Hapsburg roots. Again, we have no evidence that Malinowski actually read Herder, and Gellner preferred to attribute his anthropological holism to the philosophy of Hegel [Gellner 1998: 124-125]. When Andrzej Paluch questioned this link, Gellner's response was to claim that "it hardly matters: the ideas were so much in the air that, directly or otherwise, he could not but be familiar with them" [ibid.: 125]. The key idea, for Polish intellectuals in a city that was otherwise an 'intellectual suburb of Vienna', was a romantic cultural nationalism. Gellner explicitly endorsed Malinowski's view of 'culture as unity' and praised his "...vivid sense of the crucial nationalist premise: that men live their lives through a culture and can hardly find fulfilment in any other way." [ibid.: 131, 137] This is the 'totalitarian' view of culture at its sharpest [see Hann forthcoming].

The concept of culture underwent a major idealist twist in the hands of Talcott Parsons after the Second World War, which opened up the period in which the approaches of Clifford Geertz and the mature Marshall Sahlins have become dominant in the discipline. Gellner repeatedly condemned Geertz for his relativism and insisted that *some* knowledge, at least, had cross-cultural validity. But he did not question the concept of culture as such and, while insisting on 'cognitive universalism', he was curiously hesitant to proclaim an equivalent moral universalism. I think he betrays his latent Herderianism at this point. A careful comparison of his notion of culture with that of Geertz will show that the gap between them is much smaller than it is usually thought to be.

In his recent *Available Light*, Geertz [2000] seeks a balance between respect for difference and Charles Taylor's 'deep diversity' on the one hand, and the necessary rejection of what he terms the 'configurational', 'pointillist' view of culture, i.e. culture as integrated totality. There is no admission that his own earlier work did much to promote this view, no apology for the fact that the title of his most influential work features 'cultures' in the plural [Geertz 1973]. The tone of the recent essays is consistently relativist and idealist, as when he explains in Chapter 1 that when he writes 'culture' he means "the *mot*, not the *chose* – there is no *chose*" [Geertz 2000: 12]. In his last chapter, however, Geertz engages more concretely with divisive forces in contemporary world politics. He sets out good reasons for questioning received views on nations and nationalism and develops a political theory based on highly concrete particularist pragmatism, a 'practical politics of cultural conciliation' [ibid.: 256]. Geertz's preferences and prescriptions here, as well as the basic units of analysis he proposes, are quite similar to those of Ernest Gellner. This should not be such a great surprise since, however great the differences in their philosophical orientation and in their means of literary expression, both men share a basic conservative-liberalism, a preference for stability and a respect for the individual.

Thus, despite their epistemological differences, Geertz and Gellner share much common ground in their understanding of what a culture is and what it does for its members. Gellner's most concise definition of culture might almost have been drafted by Geertz [Gellner 1983: 7; quoted above].⁵ Hence it is not so surprising that they have simi-

⁵) In a lecture given in September 1995, only months before his death, he offered a definition with strong echoes of the later Leach: "By culture I mean simply the sum-total of the tools people employ to communicate. Language, of course, but also anything which signals: clothing, what one eats, what one does not eat, what one wears, what one does not wear, (...) The general sum-total of tokens employed for communicating with other people. Not a very satisfactory, not a very elegant

lar views about the implications of cultural diversity for politics. Geertz's political theory is based on concrete particularist pragmatism, a 'practical politics of cultural conciliation' [Geertz 2000: 256]. When he urges acknowledgement of a 'differenced world' [ibid.: 258], this seems to correspond pretty closely to Gellner's plea for 'cultural pluralism' [Gellner 1997: 108]. The latter exhortation rings curious at the end of an essay which reiterates the theory according to which nationalist homogeneity follows from the organisational requirements of modern societies. This is a tacit acknowledgement that the homogenising high cultures are not as effective as the Gellner model implies.

Geertz, through amassing a welter of examples, argues that no general model can make sense of the diversity of nations, peoples, cultures and identities in the contemporary world. But the outcome of all these cross-cutting ties is nonetheless some sort of encompassing order, now based vaguely on 'country' as a historicised place. He fails to acknowledge the force of Gellner's arguments explaining why this country normally takes the form of the nation-state and why, despite deviations from the ideal-type (some of which Gellner would dismiss as merely 'decorative'), it is this 'societal culture' that provides both basic frame of reference and dominant source of identity for the majority of citizens. To capture the diversity, Geertz comes up with another analogy. The job of the ethnographer is to compile file cards on all observable – or perhaps he means imaginable – 'levels and dimensions of difference and integration' and then to cross-index these various isolated identities, since they only obtain their meanings through interaction. [Geertz 2000: 254]. This is not incompatible with Gellner's model, in which the nation-state constitutes the basic organisational framework for modernity: Geertz simply goes rather further than Gellner in describing some of the imperfections and complications that this idea encounters in the real world.

On the point of most concern for this paper, Geertz's latest phrasing does little to amend the concept of culture. At the end of the day, the culture which results from all the 'cross-indexing' is still a unified conglomerate. It is not, of course, a cosy, frozen consensus, but an *ad hoc* style or approach: 'intersections of outlook, style or disposition, are the bases on which cultural complexity is ordered into at least something of an irregular, rickety, and indefinite whole.' [ibid.: 254-255] But what exactly is this whole? 'Irregular, rickety, and indefinite' might be a passable description of the way a late Geertz paper hangs together but is this late echo of the Herderian tradition a helpful perspective for anthropologists who wish to engage with the contemporary world?

Why culture matters

Debates about the concept of culture are important politically and not only for their academic interest. This word carries an enormous load in contemporary debates in many countries. For a recent example, consider the text issued by Pope John Paul II, whose roots lie in the same Central European city as Bronislaw Malinowski, to mark the beginning of the UN's 'International Year of Dialogue Among Civilisations'. The concept of civilisation is left undefined, but note that it is used in the plural [cf. Huntington 1996]. The German text refers throughout to '*Dialog zwischen Kulturen*' and culture turns out to be the dominant concept in the English version as well. The Pope comments on 'the com-

definition. It is very much like what St. Augustine said about time, that until asked what time is, he knew, but when asked, he didn't know how to reply. We know what culture is, but to offer a precise definition, which doesn't beg any questions, is difficult." [Gellner 1995: 85]

plexity and diversity of human cultures. Each of them is distinct by virtue of its specific historical evolution and the resulting characteristics which make it a structurally unique, original and organic whole (...) *a person necessarily lives within a specific culture*. People are marked by the culture whose very air they breathe...' [John Paul II 2001: §4-5, emphasis in original]. In the papal analysis, cultures are 'authentic' if they promote human dignity. They mature, as do individuals, through dialogue with others. At the same time, the 'intermingling of traditions and customs' brought about by large-scale contemporary migration creates the challenge of integration, for it is important to preserve 'a certain "cultural equilibrium" in each region, by reference to the culture which has prevalently marked its development.' [ibid.: §14]⁶ This text juxtaposes celebration of differences – the 'multicoloured mosaic' [ibid.: §22] with reminders of the primordial 'unity of the human race' [ibid.: §7] and of 'universal ethical values' [ibid.: §13]. The Pope may be accused of some looseness and inconsistency in his use of the concept of culture, but by the standard of much contemporary social science and moral philosophy it is nonetheless an impressive statement. He speaks of dialogue, dialectic, and the mutual constitution of cultures. Yet, like so many anthropologists, including Gellner as I read him, he remains thoroughly trapped within the nationalist's view of the world the 'mosaic' image, which projects bounded, unified cultures as entities, interacting both with their individual members and with each other is increasingly untenable in an era of accelerating globalisation.

Many believe the concept of culture should become even more central to policy-making than it is already, and many look to the academic literature, including anthropology, to support their political stance. That is why these academic debates matter. Two camps seem to be especially influential. One position, highly ethnocentric, is the claim that some populations will have to change their cultures if they want to enjoy the benefits of democracy and development [Huntington and Harrison 2000]. Few anthropologists would support this use of culture, which is suffused with an old 'Orientalist' bias in European writings about other parts of the world. The alleged deep-seated barriers to change and development in places like East and South Asia turned out to be less formidable than imagined, once certain structural conditions were in place. Ernest Gellner is sometimes suspected of Eurocentric bias (e.g. in his many writings on civil society) but I would not place him in this camp. He would not be joining those who currently argue that the Orthodox religion or the 'fatalistic Russian soul' pose a fundamental barrier to the capitalist transformation of Russia.

The second position is a liberal variant of Herderianism. This also has far-reaching political consequences in the modern world, for example in the form of Charles Taylor's case for a 'politics of recognition' [Taylor 1992] or Will Kymlicka's arguments for 'multicultural citizenship' [Kymlicka 1995]. Here the emphasis is on escaping from Western ethnocentricity, so it is hardly surprising that multiculturalism has attracted a good deal of support among anthropologists. Recently, however, a number of critics have questioned the wisdom, from the point of view of liberal objectives such as widening choices and increasing social mobility, of classifying persons into particular cultural communities. Brian Barry [2001] has published a comprehensive critical analysis which reasserts a

⁶ The text continues: "This equilibrium, even while welcoming minorities and respecting their basic rights, would allow the continued existence and development of a particular 'cultural profile', by which I mean that basic heritage of language, traditions and values which are inextricably part of a nation's history and its national identity."

more traditional liberalism, based on the individual. From a more radical political perspective, Richard Rorty [2000] has argued that left wing politics should avoid prioritising membership of a cultural community. He concludes with a preference for Mill and Dewey, who understood human diversity as a diversity of self-creating individuals, rather than a diversity of cultures.

In these debates, it seems to me that Gellner is closer to the Central European Herderian tradition than to Anglo-American liberalism. The chief problem is that none of the contestants offers an adequate definition of culture. Most slide about inconsistently between singular and plural, like Gellner himself, between usages that no anthropologist would call in question and the outright 'totalitarian', in which cultural membership determines everything. Gellner does occasionally acknowledge 'the tangled unstable overlapping nature of "cultures"', implying that they cannot be treated as bounded homogeneous units, but he does not at any point seem willing to give up his premise of culture as a 'package-deal', which 'freezes' ideas into 'organic' wholes, the antithesis of atomistic individualism.

Conclusion

I have argued that, ultimately, Geertz and Gellner have a similar concept of culture, derived from the intellectual traditions and political realities of Central Europe, and that this is inadequate for understanding and engaging with the pressing problems of the contemporary world. To understand the concepts of social philosophers we have only to put together what Gellner says about the invisibility of culture in Carpathian villages, and the air that scholars breathe. He himself did not have to read Herder or Nietzsche to acquire his concept of culture, any more than Malinowski actually had to read Hegel in order to formulate his brand of anthropological holism. This crucial concept was simply there, so to speak, in the air he breathed as he grew up in Prague. Many years later he elaborated a powerful model to explain that nationalism develops when a previously invisible culture becomes an explicit object of construction and reflection. In this paper I have suggested that this very notion of culture is flawed. It is a product of the Herderian, nationalist view of the world, which as Gellner himself argued is a contingent rather than a necessary aspect of the human condition.

CHRIS HANN worked alongside Ernest Gellner for many years in the Department of Social Anthropology at the University of Cambridge. He later became Professor of Social Anthropology at the University of Kent at Canterbury (1992-1997). He is currently Director of the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology at Halle, eastern Germany. He has recently edited *Postsocialism: ideals, ideologies and practices in Eurasia* (London, Routledge, 2002).

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